

Seems

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Summary: Hiccup has always seemed alright, but the closer Astrid gets, the more she sees. Hiccup is not alright and she intends to fix that.

## 1. Chapter 1

It all started when Astrid noticed something about Hiccup. Beyond the obvious fact that Hiccup loved dragons and dragons loved Hiccup, they did not know the first thing about the hero of Berk. No one did, not Fishlegs, not Stoick, not even the girl who had come the closest to him besides Toothless. Astrid who had come to like the part of him she had once glimpsed resolved to find out if there was more, and draw him out of hiding

When the dragons first came to Berk after the death of the queen on dragon island, it was as if some god had drawn an invisible line between viking and dragon kind. Each side sat there quietly looking across the gap, not attacking but not retreating either. To Astrid, it seemed as though the different sides were remembering all the grievances that had passed between them, and as the time passed on without movement, the tension mounted. It was the newest trainees in dragon training that made the first move. Well, it was Astrid. She stepped forward, boldly, but non-threateningly, and crossed the line onto the side of the dragons.

Several people were ready to rush forward to defend when a sky blue Nadder pushed its way out of the mass of dragons advancing swiftly toward the girl, only to stop, chatter happily and press its horned snout under the girl's hand like an affectionate dog. The ice continued to break away as the rest of the teens joined her, greeting the dragons that had carried them into battle not a week before. After that, the vikings did as they had always done, jump in head first and hope for the best. It did not take long for the dragons to become common place in Berk, and were treated less like pets and more like trusted friends.

From there, it did not seem like such a stretch, that when Hiccup woke up from his wounds, that he would be accepted into the village as easily or more so yet than the dragons. Wounds given in the heat of battle, afterward are easily forgiven. However, the wounds Hiccup had received were not given to him in the middle of a melee, but rather during times that should have been safe and were not. Those are the wounds that are the hardest to forgive. Astrid would learn this as she slowly regained the trust that was lost ever since Hiccup was dismissed as just what his name implied.

Astrid leaned over her mug, slowly nursing the hot bitter tea that was there mainly to warm her hands. She took a sip and winced, tempted to spit it back out. But it was warm, and precious little else on Berk was, so she swallowed it. Her attention turned halfheartedly towards the group she sat with. Snotlout was talking and that alone tempted her to shut her ears to whatever fool thing was spilling from his mouth.

"And then he was like, 'Have you seen my paint brush?' That's when he stood up. I'm the one who found it of course. He'd been sitting on it the whole time and this guy had yellow paint all over his but!"

There was a smattering of chuckles from the twins.

"Dude!" Ruffnut exclaimed. "I'm gonna have to keep this in mind for my sister. That's awesome!"

Tuffnut responded by punching her twin on the shoulder hard enough to knock him off his seat. "Not if I get you first!" she countered. "Or-no. I've got an even better idea! Lets get the Useless with this one and then see how long it takes for him to notice!"

Astrid muttered an oath under her breath and stood up gaining the group's undivided attention. Even Fishlegs glanced up from his book.

"What is it gonna take for you guys to learn?" she demanded angrily. "Who do you think got us all here today, huh? If it weren't for 'that useless Hiccup' we'd all be dragon fodder right now, and this is how you repay him? You guys had better wise up about him soon, or I will do it for you!"

Snotlout glanced at her, completely unphased by her outburst. "What's got you so upset?" he asked nonchalantly. "Its not like you really know him or anything. So whats it to you if we have a little fun with him now and then?"

Astrid hesitated as his words hit home in an entirely different spot than Snotlout had intended to hit. It was true. She didn't really know much at all about the quiet, sarcastic boy who had saved their village. She didn't even know what his favorite color was. Strange. For so long, he'd been the village's biggest screw up, and yet, how did he stay so well hidden? The thought prompted her to look around. He was nowhere in sight.

"Where is he anyway?" she asked.

"Who cares?" Snotlout asked. "He's wherever he goes to be useless."

Astrid blinked with a sudden epiphany. That's how he stayed hidden, she thought. It was simply that no one had ever cared to look before. Well that was going to change. Now she just had to find him. She smiled, it would be about as hard as finding a big black dragon.

## 2. Chapter 2

Hi, everyone, I'm Lyra and I want to thank you for following my first (posted) fanfic. I forgot the disclaimer in the first chapter and I will fix that here. Toothless would you like the honors?

Toothless stares at me with a look that clearly says 'Are you kidding me?' and marches off, tail lashing behind him in obvious annoyance.

Okay, so just me then... I do not own \_How to Train Your Dragon\_, all the credit goes to Cressida Cowell and DreamWorks.

Astrid checked the forge first. There was a light on and she could hear the clank of a hammer on metal. She peeked her head into the building and found Gobber hard at work, repairing a torn shovel head.

"Wow," she commented on the jagged rent in the farm tool. "That must have been a feat of strength."

Gobber glanced up from his work briefly, giving her a welcoming smile. "Ol' Boulderbrains was up to his work again," he said. "He was trying to pry a rock out of his fields, you know, the one he's always breaking his plow on?"

"And the shovel gave out first?" Astrid guessed.

"Heh heh," Gobber chuckled, moving the metal back over the fire again. He worked the bellows a few times before turning to her, dusting off his hand on his leather apron. "That rock's been there since the beginning of Berk. But that wont stop him from trying to move it. Anyway, I'm sure you're not here for an old man's ramblings."

Astrid smiled to let him know that she didn't mind. "I was looking for Hiccup, actually," she said. "Have you seen him?"

Gobber glanced out of the shop over her shoulder with a slight wince. "I think the lad's up at his house," he said. "Today's not a good day to have missing limbs."

Astrid frowned, "What do you mean?"

The smith rolled his shoulders, turning back to the shovel head lying in the glowing coals of the forge fire. "My aching limbs tell me there's foul weather headed our way," he said without looking at her. "I'm sure Hiccup knows it too. You'd better go find him lass."

Oh. Gobber had once told her that his arm and his leg troubled him at times when there was a change in the weather. How much worse would it be for Hiccup, whose leg hadn't been off for an entire two months

yet? Darn it! Why hadn't she thought of that before?

Astrid turned to walk out of the forge. "I'll find him," she tossed over her shoulder.

"Good las!" Gobber called back. "Tell him I'll cover the forge by myself tomorrow."

"Sure."

The chief's house stood just below the mead hall, looming importantly over the rest of the village. It was bigger too, than most of the buildings in Berk. She had always thought it a little ironic that the smallest viking lived in the biggest, emptiest, house. Now it struck her as a cruel joke. She had seen Stoick the Vast in the hall, eating with the other vikings, engaged in a lengthy conversation with his brother and some of the other older, influential vikings. It meant no one was home to take care of the newest amputee.

She didn't blame Stoick for not being there. He was clearly busy doing chiefly stuff, but there was still a small seed of resentment in her that she could not uproot. A father should be there for his children. But then Astrid hesitated at the great wooden door to the big house. Its not like she had been doing much better. Who was she to judge? How many times had her eyes slid over Hiccup without really noting his presence? How many times had she caught Snotlout in the middle of an act of cruelty towards the young man and walked by without lifting a finger to help him? Astrid sighed, hating the rotten feeling of guilt that was souring her mood. She had some apologizing to do. The whole village did. She raised a hand and knocked on the door, turning back to glance at the village as she waited.

The sky caught her attention. Gobber had been right. There was a great storm rolling in from the sea. There was a great column of cloud towering over the island. The top was white and fluffy looking, but down towards the bottom it was a dark bruised looking purple. It didn't look like the most threatening storm she'd ever seen, but still, the island was in for a rough night.

The door behind her opened, startling her, and she turned to see Hiccup peeking out at her. He blinked in surprise, and the door opened wider.

"Astrid!" he exclaimed. "Hi... Astrid."

Astrid stared back at him, her mind suddenly empty and her mouth dry. Now what? She struggled, grappling with a rising panic, trying to find a way to start, a way to justify her visit. Nothing was coming.

"Ah," Hiccup began uncertainly. "Would you-. Would you like to come in?" He glanced over her shoulder with nervous energy. "It looks like its gonna rain soon..."

Rain. Weather. Hiccup stepped aside, making way for her, but not opening the door much further than she would need to pass through. It was almost as if he was trying to make sure only she could pass. Astrid stepped inside, nodding her thanks, and glanced around the room taking in the large weapons scattered through the living space.

These belonged to Stoick of course. The small dagger sitting on the low table before the fire seemed out of place. It had to be Hiccup's. Would he ever actually use it?

Astrid turned to look at him. He was still standing by the door, even though he'd already closed it, and actually seemed reluctant to move away from it. That is when she noticed that he looked pale, and there was a sheen of sweat on his upper lip, and forehead. His shoulders were hunched and tense. Her gaze traveled down to his mismatched legs. He was definitely favoring his left side.

"So," he said a little too lightly. "What can I do for you today, Astrid?"

Astrid moved closer to him for a better look at him, and saw him gulp nervously. What was making him so jumpy? It had her worried, especially since his usually soft, clear green eyes were looking pinched and glassy.

"Hiccup," she said at last and he flinched. Her temper flared. "Look, would you relax?!" she snapped. "I came to make sure you were alright, because Gobber mentioned there was a storm coming in."

He stared at her wide eyed, looking slightly taken aback, and Astrid took a moment to congratulate herself on her wonderful start. \_Nice going Astrid, you \_really\_ put him at ease there\_.

"Oh," he said in a carefully neutral tone. "Well, as you can see, I'm just fine. Thanks for checking up on me."

His eyes went over her shoulder as he spoke and he suddenly looked relieved. Astrid almost jumped at the soft blowing that sounded right next to her ear. Oh. There he was. She turned slightly to glimpse a large scaly black nose.

"Hey, Toothless," she said. The dragon fearlessly nudged his head under her hand with a happy croon and she laughed. "Good to see you, too."

Astrid turned back to Hiccup just in time to see his features tighten in pain. He leaned more to the right, and though his prosthetic was resting on the floor, she could see he was putting no weight on it at all. Who was he trying to fool? It was clear that he was in a lot of pain. He hadn't stepped away from the door this whole time because it would mean putting pressure on his injured leg.

"Hiccup," she said, trying not to sound \_too\_ exasperated. "Your leg's bothering you, isn't it. And don't lie to me."

Hiccup gave her a pale, strained, smile and a false laugh. "How can my leg bother me if it isn't there?" he asked jokingly.

Astrid could only look on in slight shock, and horror, as he continued to laugh at his twisted joke, that is, until his laugh turned into a choked sob. Then he cut off abruptly, looking up at her, his green eyes wide with surprise, and bright with pain. \_Oh, Hiccup.\_

"It's not there," he said again, his voice sounding far more strained and insistent.

Astrid frowned, was he still trying to cover this up?

"It's funny!" he insisted desperately, tears beginning to mist his eyes. "'Cause it's not there. It's funny, isn't it Astrid?"

He looked at her searchingly, hoping for a confirmation so that he could continue this sick facade. Astrid looked at his pale face taking in the dark rings around his hollow eyes and the freckles that stood out in sharp relief against alabaster skin. His eyes were hard to look at because they were filled to the brim and overflowing with pain and pleading. Her heart broke for him, and she closed her eyes briefly, trying to come to terms with the feeling before it escaped as tears of her own.

"No, Hiccup," she said gently, opening her eyes again. "It's not funny. Not even a little bit." Then she held her peace and waited, carefully watching his face as his facade crumbled and broke, that horrifying fake smile sliding off his face to reveal the full brunt of his pain and grief.

"It's not there," he said again quietly. And then again, his voice tight with pain. "It's not there..."

Toothless pressed forward with a worried sounding whine, and Astrid carefully pulled Hiccup into her arms, keeping his weight off his bad leg. Well, wasn't this a wonderful situation? She had no idea what to do now that Hiccup was a nearly hysterical mess. She wasn't exactly an expert on comforting people.

With a sigh, she leaned down and caught Hiccup's legs in the crook of her arm and scooped him up off the floor, earning a wince as the prosthetic pulled at his stump. He was too light, and she could feel his ribs plainly against her hand as she supported him. Hadn't he been eating at all? She quickly crossed the room and eased him down on the bed that had been moved downstairs for him.

"Hiccup," she said trying to get his attention.

His eyes locked on her with almost feverish intensity. "It's gone," he said miserably. "So why does it hurt so much?"

The tears finally escaped his eyes and he wiped them away with uncharacteristic ferocity. He looked disgusted with himself. "I'm still not a viking. After all this..."

Astrid looked at him with confusion, noting the way he was fighting against the broken sobs that threatened.

"What do you mean you aren't a viking?" she asked. "You live here don't you?"

Hiccup shook his head and laughed bitterly. "Look at me," he snapped. "I'm crying for Odin's sake! Vikings don't feel pain, they don't get upset over a missing leg, and they don't cry!"

Astrid couldn't hold back a slightly incredulous scoff. "Where did you get that idea?" she asked. "'Cause as far as standards go, that's a pretty tall one to live up to."

Hiccup seemed to shrink into himself rather than take encouragement. "Well you guys seem to live up to it really well," he said in a hoarse hopeless tone. "I mean, I've never seen you cry."

Astrid pursed her lips, and decided a different approach was best. "But I have," she admitted quietly.

That caught Hiccup's attention. He looked up at her sharply, consideration in his green eyes. "You have? I didn't think you were capable of-."

"You big dummy," Astrid said, cutting him off in annoyance. "Of course I can cry. I cried when they told me that they'd had to cut your leg off. See, I'm sad about it, too."

Hiccup threw himself forward before she'd even finished speaking and wrapped his arms around her. Astrid went stiff in shock at the sudden change, but nearly started crying again herself at his heart broken weeping.

"Its gone!" he cried. "Its gone! And it hurts!"

Astrid laughed a little wetly, wrapping her arms around him, holding him as his body shook and trembled. "Why didn't you say so, dummy? Do you have any medicine for it?"

Hiccup gulped a few time and brought his frantic breaths under control. She felt him nod against her shoulder and managed to get out that it was on the table behind her.

"Alright," she said. "Toothless do you mind propping him up?"

Toothless seemed to scoff in reply and rose up smoothly on the bed, settling comfortably behind Hiccup so that he could lean back against his scaly black side.

"Since when are you two so comfortable around each other?" he exclaimed.

Astrid turned to him with the jar of salve in her hand. "Is that a bad thing?" she asked.

Hiccup's blush didn't do much to put color in his cheeks. He turned his head slightly, avoiding her eyes. "No," he said almost warily. "It's just a little sudden, is all." He reached out a hand and rubbed the dragon's head fondly earning a rumbling purr. "You'll have to take it off," he muttered under his breath.

Astrid glanced up at him and frowned at the sudden subject change. "What?"

"M-my, the- the prosthetic," he said in a quiet rush, but Astrid caught it.

"Ah." She set the medicine on the bed and gently rolled up the tattered leg of his trousers to the point where wood met flesh. It looked swollen and red and she could not help but hiss in sympathy. Then she set about undoing the buckles that kept it in place. She'd seen Gobber do it once, and it was pretty simple.

Hiccup hissed in pain, his back arching as the fake leg came away. Astrid set it down against the bed within easy reach, and grabbed Hiccup's shoulders, steadying him as he fought through the pain.

"It hurts!" he fussed, grabbing her arms in a death grip.

Astrid leaned forward until her forehead brushed his. "I know," she told him. "I'm sorry."

He nodded as his breaths calmed again and Astrid let go, gently pulling her arms out of his grip. His hands fist-ed in the blankets on either side of him instead. She opened the jar and took a great dollop of it on her fingers and gently began to rub it on the scarred stump slowly increasing the pressure until Hiccup was writhing in pain (and nearly screaming) against his frantically concerned dragon. Astrid did not pause in her work to dry the tears that were now flowing freely down her cheeks.

Then all at once, the cut off muscles in his leg seemed to relax under her fingers and Hiccup fell, sobbing with relief against his best friend. Toothless hummed encouragingly, wrapping his tale around so that it lay across Hiccup's lap.

"Thanks bud," Hiccup said sounding weak, but steady. Then he sat up a little. "And Astrid-."

"It was no problem Hiccup," she said. "It's the least I could do."

"Astrid?"

"Hiccup, I already told you there's no need for you to thank-."

"Astrid, it's raining," Hiccup said in a rush, cutting her off. "Will you stay?"

Astrid looked up at him, slightly startled at the change in pace. But then she glanced up at the roof and listened. The hard rapid knocking sound of a harsh driving rain was suddenly loud in her ears. She startled when she felt a gentle, warm touch on her cheek and she turned to see Hiccup gazing at a drop of water hanging from his finger with wonder. It was a tear, she realized. Hers specifically. He glanced up at her with that same look of wonder.

"When did you start crying?" he asked quietly.

Astrid swallowed thickly, trying to rid herself of the lump in her throat, and turned her eyes away. \_The day I met a viking who wouldn't kill dragons.\_

"I'll stay," was all she said and Toothless lifted his tail briefly so that Astrid could sit down next to Hiccup. He was still trembling slightly, and she looked at him carefully, trying to judge if it would turn into tears again, but he merely relaxed when she pulled him to lean against her. Well, he seemed alright at the moment. But he had also seemed alright, when he'd first woken up, and when he'd first started relearning how to walk. Only just now did he finally grieve over his loss. It had been a full month and only just



now...

Astrid turned to ask him about the delay, but discovered that he was fast asleep. Figures. He had been exhausted though, and she could not fault him. For such a small viking, he sure was a big dummy at times. Oh well. Darn it, she hadn't gotten a chance to ask him his favorite color...

Stoick the Vast entered his house quickly, escaping the driving rain. He closed the door and barred it against the wind then turned and halted in his tracks. There on the temporary bed, was his son, and the fierce Hofferson girl, lying asleep next to each other. He knew that girl. She had been the one who volunteered to take care of Hiccup while he was in a coma. She had also kissed him the day he woke up. He frowned. What was she doing here?

He snuck closer and found to his surprise that their faces were covered in tear tracks. Hiccup's prosthetic was leaning idly against the side of the bed, and there was the pungent smell of medicine in the air. He quickly put it together from there. The storm had probably a lot to do with it, he thought, glancing at his son's ruined leg.

It was a bitter sort of comfort to know that some one had been here for him at least. He only wished that his duties allowed him a little more freedom as a father. Stoick straightened the clumsily pulled up blanket over the two kids. It looked like Toothless had tried to tuck them in. Then he glanced around for the dragon and spotted his shadowy mass hanging like a bat from the rafters. Those electric green eyes opened as Stoick looked at him, but the dragon merely nodded and went back to sleep.

Stoick smiled. \_You would be proud Val. Your son has managed to tame the unholy offspring of lightening and death itself. That and a proud shieldmaiden. He takes after you so much. I wish you could see him now...\_

### 3. Chapter 3

Hello, again and welcome to the third chapter! I got some wonderful reviews from the last chapter and I'm a bit excited, because those were the first ever! Ha! So thank you guys and I hope you continue to follow this tale. And now the moment we've been waiting for...

Stormfly, care to do the honors?

Stormfly cocks her head and chatters curiously.

Ahem, the disclaimer...

The blue dragon trills happily, then growls.

For those who don't speak dragonese, she said, Lyra does not own \_How to Train Your Dragon, \_or... close enough...

Astrid woke up all at once as she usually did when she fell asleep in a place that wasn't her bedroom. But she calmed down pretty quickly when she realized it was the chief's house. Hiccup was a soft, warm

presence beside her, and she smiled at the peaceful expression on his face. It occurred to her that she had never seen him so relaxed, not even when he'd been asleep for two weeks in the aftermath of that dragon fight... if it could be called that.

It was a lot different from his usual expression. He walked around the village with a guarded look. His lips pressed into a thin line and his eyes darting around restlessly, like he was hoping to spot trouble before it spotted him. That look still lingered even among his friends, even when he smiled. It was as if he couldn't let his guard slip for even a moment, not even when sharing a laugh with the others. But things were different now. He had friends at all, for one, and the adults no longer threatened to spank him for wandering too close to their houses (she had seen that happen once). So why wasn't he letting his guard down? Old habits die hard? Or was there something still going on to make him feel... threatened?

Hmmm... Either way, Astrid resolved to keep a close eye on him. His leg would be the perfect excuse to walk him home from dragon training today. Now, to sneak back home without her mother catching her... She would most certainly need a plan.

A few weeks passed and Astrid managed to uphold her decision to keep and eye on her dragon tamer. She learned some things about him this way. One, he really had a nack for disappearing into crowds, and two he was really hard to follow without being caught. More than once, he had spotted her, and at first, he didn't seem to suspect anything and had invited her to walk with him, all the while blushing furiously. The second time. He smiled and held out his hand. The third time, he had smiled knowingly at her, but did nothing to try to lose her in the crowd, but he didn't invite her over either. In fact, he had straightened up out of his usual defensive slouch and held his head high and without fear, turning his back on her. Astrid knew this was not a rejection on his part. In fact, she took it as quite the opposite. It was as if he'd told her he knew she had his back, and because of that, no longer felt afraid.

That night, Astrid had gone to bed and lie awake for some time thinking about the level of trust she had earned from him. It was an honor that he trusted her enough to turn his back to her, leaving himself vulnerable to her. She had noticed before that he had this quirk. When he entered a room, he always stuck to the edges, always certain to keep all the rest of the people in his line of sight. It was a tactic she had been taught in the advanced weapons training courses she was taking. When entering a rough place, be it a building or even a neighborhood, never give your enemy the chance to sneak up behind you. Astrid struggled at times to practice this kind of self awareness. Hiccup however, was a master of this skill.

There was no possible way he could have been taught this in class. He was considered too clumsy and weak to ever become a master of any weapon. So she was certain he had learned this out of necessity. Therefore, the fact that he had purposefully turned his back to her was a significant mark of trust. Now she just had to get him to walk like that all the time, proudly and fearlessly.

Things got complicated however, when her careful watch turned up something she had hoped she'd never see again.

She lost Hiccup briefly when he turned a corner, and she picked up

her pace slightly to catch him up, in case he happened to turn another corner. But she stopped when she turned the corner herself and did not see him. Astrid frowned, a prick of worry jabbing at her, but she pushed it aside. It had been a full three months and more since anyone had even so much as crossed the line while teasing him. There was no way anyone would attack the savior of their village now.

But then she heard it. A shout of surprise and pain, followed by a quick loud scuffle. Astrid broke into a sprint, rounding a corner just in time to see Snotlout clubbing Hiccup with his own fake leg. She froze for a second, taking in the scene. Hiccup's arms were bound, and Snotlout was keeping him trapped by standing on the rope. The smaller of them was fighting gamely, pulling furiously, and kicking out when he could, but Snotlout was too much for him, especially since he was down a leg.

Another blow fell on Hiccup's unprotected back, and Astrid cursed herself for hesitating. Then, with a wordless cry of rage, the shield maiden fell upon Snotlout like a lightening bolt. The haft of her axe connected with his jaw and down he went, an almost comical look of surprise on his face. He looked up at her from his abrupt seat on the ground and blanched.

"Astrid?" Hiccup asked from behind her, sounding dazed and more than a little shocked, but she ignored him for the time being.

"Snotlout," she spat. "If I hear you've been picking on Hiccup again after this, I will find you and return, blow for blow what you have done to Hiccup. He is your cousin! Your family! Start acting like it! Now give me that," she snatched the prosthetic out of his numb hands, "and get out of my sight!"

Snotlout stood, and seemed to have a light of challenge in his eyes. But Astrid took a lightening step forward and shouted in his face, "RUN!"

Then he was afraid. Snotlout took her suggestion.

Astrid straightened her skirt with an angry huff, and did her level best to contain the feeling that her blood was boiling in her chest and in the pit of her stomach. Then turned to Hiccup and found it was a lot easier to feel gentle when she looked at him. She felt her expression gain a softness that never came out for anyone else.

She knelt before him, ready to untie him only to notice with a touch of pride that he'd already slipped the rope. He moved slowly, pushing himself into a sitting position with his left leg held tight against his skinny chest, and the stump part curled in against his thigh. His face was tight with pain, but other than that, devoid of emotion and Astrid quickly realized he was still in endurance mode, still waiting to have to hold on till it was all over and hope there was something left to salvage later.

"Hiccup," she said softly, reaching towards him, hoping to shake him out of whatever this was.

He flinched away from her hand however, and bowed his head, waiting.

"Hiccup!" Astrid said with rising distress. "It's over now, you're safe."

Finally he looked up and met her gaze, and she frowned at what she saw in his eyes. There was a wild look there, kind of like a cornered dragon, as well as the haunted look of a person without hope.

"Hiccup," Astrid whispered, feeling strangely like she was trying to calm a wild dragon. Perhaps, in a way, she was. "Hiccup. It's okay, you're safe now. He's gone."

Hiccup continued to eye her warily for a bit, then he closed his eyes and sighed heavily. When he opened his eyes again, Astrid could tell that her Hiccup was back, if a little subdued. She reached for him again and he did not shy away. Astrid pulled him into her arms for a hug, but he remained stiff and tense.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "What happened?"

He sighed again and averted his eyes from her. "How much did you see?"

Astrid frowned. He sounded ashamed and defeated. "Enough," she said. "Now tell me what he did."

"I-I'm pretty sure he was waiting for me," he said reluctantly, still not looking up at her. "He jumped me from behind and got my wrists in a slip knot. He grabbed my prosthetic next, and just tore it right off. I'm pretty sure he broke a strap, I heard a snapping sound."

Astrid glanced at the fake leg and sure enough, the main leather strap had snapped. It hung uselessly from the wood, still fastened.

"And what about your leg?" Astrid asked. "That had to have hurt."

Hiccup seemed to shrink further into himself, but he did not say anything or try to stop her when she pushed his empty pant leg up to check. The leather had left him with a nasty scrape and a shallow cut before it snapped.

"Ouch," she said. "Come on, we need to get you cleaned up."

Astrid shifted her weight and pulled Hiccup's arm over her shoulder in preparation to stand.

"Uhhhh, Astrid?" Hiccup protested, a slight amount of alarm in his voice. "I'm short a leg here-."

"Hiccup, relax," Astrid said cutting him off. "Did you really think I was gonna make you crawl?"

She stood up so that she was supporting him on the left side, but he held on to her tightly with a tense look on his face as if he was preparing for her to drop him. When she continued to hold on to him he relaxed and finally realized her intention.

"Oh," he said. "W-well that works too."

"Where are we going anyway? Your house or mine?" Astrid asked.

"The forge?" Hiccup suggested with an almost pleading note in his voice. "Gobber keeps medical supplies, and it's close."

"The forge it is then," Astrid said taking a step forward and pulling Hiccup closer to support more of his weight.

They made their slow way forward for a bit in silence, and Astrid beginning to really see how much he suffered without his leg. As they walked, Hiccup was forced to lean heavily against her, but he could not seem to stop his shortened leg from moving. The limb almost seemed to have a mind of its own stretching and straining to make contact with the ground, as if he still expected something to be there. People stared as they emerged onto a busier road, and Astrid felt Hiccup tensing up in her arms, almost like he was trying to fold into himself so tightly that there was nothing left for others to stare at.

Astrid stared right back until they looked away. "Hiccup," she murmured. "If you keep trying to disappear, they're just going to keep looking. You need to act like this is normal."

"That's the problem," Hiccup hissed back. "It is normal."

Astrid sighed. "Hiccup, that's not what I meant and you know it."

They had made it to the forge by then and they ducked inside, Gobber was hammering a piece of glowing metal, but he looked up as they ducked inside and paused mid-swing with a frown. "Hiccup?" he asked. The man turned and quenched the metal glowing in a nearby bucket of water with a satisfying hiss.

Hiccup winced shifting his weight back into Astrid's arm. "On second thought, maybe we should go to your house," he said hastily.

Astrid stood firm rolling her eyes. "We need to tell somebody about this."

"I don't want to tell anyone about this!" he hissed quietly. He ducked his head and there was a dark blush in his cheeks.

"Hiccup!" Astrid scolded. "There's no need to be ashamed over this! He overpowered you! There was nothing you could have done."

Gobber had left the anvil at this point and he came over to them.

"What happened?" he asked simply.

Hiccup glared at the ground refusing to meet any eyes, but his grip on Astrid was tight.

Astrid sighed again. "Snotlout happened," she stated flatly, handing the damaged prosthetic to the smith.

Gobber took it, his blue eyes quickly taking in the broken leather strap. "I thought as much," he said quietly.

Hiccup looked up in surprise at him, but then quickly looked away again.

"Lad, it's as Astrid said," Gobber said with surprising gentleness. "You fought didn't you?"

"Apparently not hard enough," Hiccup said, finally looking up for a decent amount of time.

Gobber shook his head like it didn't matter. "But you fought," he said, gently pressing Hiccup on the chest with the back of his hook. "You didn't lie down and take it, without retaliating."

"I lost!" Hiccup said incredulously.

"Of course you did," Gobber said turning toward the leather working table. "Snotlout's three times bigger than you are, ten times stronger, and a hundred times more cruel. There's also the llllllitttle fact that you're missing a leg. Or did you miss that too?"

Hiccup huffed irritably and Astrid smiled. Irritated was better than embarrassed and defeated.

"How on earth could anyone miss something as earth shattering as that?" Hiccup asked sarcastically.

"Well you seem to have," Gobber said, not turning around to face them from fiddling with the prosthetic. "You're still beating yourself up over it after all. Astrid, get him up on the table, will ya?"

Astrid dragged Hiccup forward to the table and neatly scooped his leg out from beneath him, ignoring his indignant yelp.

Gobber chuckled as Astrid set him on the table. "See?" he said. "Even the lasses can manhandle you."

Hiccup colored again. "Well that's Astrid!" he exclaimed defensively.

"And Ruffnut couldn't?" Gobber asked innocently.

Hiccup remained silent, crossing his arms with a slight pout. Astrid smiled. He was so cute, she could have kissed him. But Gobber was hovering over him, examining the laceration on what was left of his leg. The smith patched up his apprentice and wound a clean bandage around his leg before he buckled on the newly repaired prosthetic.

"That should do ya!" he said clapping Hiccup on the shoulder before letting him slide off the table. Hiccup landed with a slight wince and took a couple of steps before nodding. It was good to see him on his own two- er- standing on his own again.

"Thanks Gobber," he said. "Do I owe you anything?"

"Heh heh," Gobber chuckled at him good naturedly. "You know the rules, Hiccup. Apprentices and their beautiful lady friends, get discounts!"

Hiccup finally smiled, and Astrid felt relieved. Who knew Gobber was so good at lifting Hiccup out of such black moods?

"Though I got one more question for you lad," he said. "Where was that Night Fury of yours for all this?"

Hiccup looked down and away again. "Off playing with Stormfly?"

"I see," Gobber said softly. "Well, keep him with you more often. And no complaining! That dragon would much rather see that you are safe than spend time fooling around with the other dragons."

Hiccup smiled again. He knew it was the truth. Astrid herself had noticed that Toothless tended to be very protective of his boy. Even towards her sometimes, she thought with a smile, but that smile suddenly fell. \_But especially towards Snotlout.\_ Hiccup waved over his shoulder as they left the forge.

"Hiccup," Astrid said. "Is this the first time this has happened?"

"Yeah," he said with clear reluctance. He stopped suddenly. "It isn't fair!" he exclaimed. "Everything is supposed to be different now! I've proven myself now! So why?!"

Astrid could understand his anger. She was mad about this herself, especially since it had ultimately harmed her Hiccup, but she understood how it had happened. It was true, ever since Hiccup had defeated the red death, a lot \_had\_ changed, but there was one thing that had not. It had been common knowledge that Spitelout wanted Snotlout, his son, and Hiccup's cousin, to be next in line for the chieftom of Berk. Now it was apparent, that wish had not changed.

Astrid started pulling Hiccup up the hill towards his father's house.

"Astrid?" he asked.

"We need to talk to your father about this," she said.

"Ar- th- wha- wait!" he stuttered. "My dad's not gonna want to hear about this!"

"Oh yes he will!" Astrid cut him off before he could say anymore. "He's your \_father\_, and besides." She turned to look at him. "I have found a standing threat to the heir of Berk, and it is my duty as a shield maiden of Berk to report it!"

#### 4. Chapter 4

The forth chapter is up! Enjoy!

Now, Snotlout gave me some advice on this one. HEY! Hookfang! You give the disclaimer, RIGHT NOW!

Hookfang roars and snaps down on my head and gives a small but vicious shake.

Okay... I, Lyra, do not own \_How to Train Your Dragon. \_Now then, can I get a little help here? Snotlout? Hiccup? Toothless? Anybody...?

oOoOo

Astrid grinned fiercely at Hiccup, feeling very proud of her plan. Stoick, of course would be angry to hear about the abuse Hiccup had been going through and would no doubt act immediately to prevent it from happening again. The shield maiden duty thing was, admittedly, entirely for Hiccup's sake. If she could convince Hiccup that she would be shirking her duty by not going to his father with this situation, he would bend over backward to keep her from getting into trouble.

"Astrid!" Hiccup protested. "You can't just-! I mean-! This will only make the situation worse! The second you say 'Hiccup,' and 'bullied' he'll go off like an angry rumblehorn! Then it'll get to Spitelout who will pass it on to Snotlout who will hit me even harder next time, besides the fact that it'll give him more fodder to mock me with. I can hear him now! 'Oh Hiccup, I always thought you were useless, but I never thought you were a coward and a tattler! Two more inglorious titles to add to your epitaph once I'm finished with you.'" he said all this waving his arms around in wild gesticulations to emphasis his point.

Astrid couldn't hold back a teasing chuckle, but she turned to face him. "First of all, Snotlout isn't clever enough by far to come up with the epitaph thing," she told him with an almost straight face.

Hiccup gave her a crooked smile at the compliment, relaxing slightly as he realized she was willing to argue this point. "Okay, what's the second point?"

Astrid did her best to give him a serious look. "Your father will listen, Hiccup. I promise he will."

Hiccup glanced away again, sadness and uncertainty in his eyes. "How can you say that with such confidence after what happened last time?" he asked quietly. "You were there! You saw how angry he got when I finally had his attention. He disowned me! And if he would go so far over something like that, how far do you think he'll go in a case like this? Its not worth it Astrid!"

Astrid pursed her lips. "Hiccup," she said softly. "Your father has absolute faith in you now. It might have come at too great a cost, but he understands that. Now don't you think \_you\_ could have some faith in \_him?\_ I've seen the way he looks at you when you take Toothless's help over his, or well, anyone's help for that matter. He knows he's lost your trust, and the one thing that couldn't make him happier would be if you were to go to him for help. I think its time for you to start trusting your dad again, don't you think?"

Hiccup looked at her, his eyes wide with shock, and something else. It could have been hope, it could have been a wish to have that



uncomplicated relationship with his father; to have the ability to call him daddy again, like he used to when he was younger. Astrid felt her heart melt a little. Hiccup wanted that so much that it seemed he would overlook his father's mistake to take the chance that he could have it. Any other viking would have been too hardened to even consider it. This is what made Hiccup special, it wasn't in him to hold a grudge, or even lose faith in some one. That's probably what kept him from jumping on his dragon's back and flying away to greener shores. It was a strange kind of strength, Astrid thought, but she could not help but recognize it as such and give it it's due respect.

Hiccup seemed to think it over and a guarded light of hope entered his eyes. He sighed. "Alright," he relented. "Let's give it a shot."

Astrid smiled and continued to drag him up the hill towards his house, by his arm.

"Astrid!" he protested again. "It's not like my dad's even gonna be there until late tonight."

"That's not the only reason we're going up there, you big dummy," Astrid shot back. "You keep bruise ointment up there don't you?"

"Yeah?" Hiccup said. "Why do we need that?"

Astrid held back an unladylike snort and turned, patting Hiccup on the back and watching him wince as his injuries made themselves known again.

"Point taken," he said, hastily backing out of her range, but she dodged forward and punched his shoulder just hard enough to get an indignant "Ow!"

"That's for arguing with me!" Astrid stated proudly, but then she grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled him in for another of her hard, rough, kisses. "And that's for everything else."

Hiccup looked at her with a slightly dazed expression and nodded. "I should agree with you more often."

Astrid smiled. "You're a quick learner, Hiccup!" she said and turned back towards his house again, all the while appreciating the attention she had gathered with her little show. \_That's right. I just did that. I kissed him in front of Thor and everybody, and nobody else ever will!\_

As Hiccup predicted, Stoick wasn't home, but that gave her time to see if Hiccup was injured in any place other than his leg and his back, where Snotlout had no doubt clubbed him more than once. They got inside and Astrid immediately pushed Hiccup down onto a bench. She found the bruise ointment on the hearth shelf next to a crude stone hammer and a dirty stew bowl.

"Sorry about the mess," Hiccup stammered. "Neither of us have been doing a lot of chores lately."

"It's understandable," Astrid said with a shrug as she walked around

the table to sit on the bench behind him. "I guess between the dragon academy and chiefting, neither of you have a lot of time on your hands for things like this."

Astrid pushed up the back of Hiccup's shirt and was immediately angry at Snotlout again as the bruises were revealed. They had already turned a purple color and would only grow darker over time. The blows had fallen on his upper back, in the area between his shoulder blades and on his spine. \_What was Snotlout thinking?!\_ her mind raged. Spinal injuries were always severe and slow to heal. If that... oaf had hit much harder, Hiccup could have been paralyzed, or even killed!

"Astrid? You're growling," Hiccup said nervously, shaking her out of her thoughts. "Am I gonna die?"

Astrid sighed and leaned forward to rest her forehead against Hiccup's back, as her anger faded some. "No, Hiccup," she said. "I just don't like seeing you hurt."

"Oh," he said quietly. He didn't say anything more, even when she started rubbing the medicine over his bruises.

He didn't even flinch when she pressed harder on the bruise over his spine, just to make sure there was no damage to the bones. She was relieved to find none. Of course, that's when she noticed that she could count his ribs.

"Hiccup, did you eat breakfast today?" she asked.

He startled and turned to look back at her. "Why do you ask?" he said evasively, and that was all the answer she needed.

Astrid glared at him. "No wonder you're so small!" she exclaimed. "You never eat anything!"

"I eat!" Hiccup defended himself heatedly. He stood up, pushing his shirt back down and glared back at her. "You sit with me in the great hall at dinner time!"

Astrid crossed her arms and eyed him speculatively. "Yeah, I have seen you eat, and you don't eat nearly enough! Did you eat lunch today?"

Hiccup ducked a little, his eyes wide and darting around everywhere as if looking for an escape. "Okay, but I upgraded Toothless's tail fin today."

"Don't change the subject!" Astrid nearly shouted.

"Aaaaahhhh, let me explain!" he said. "I just get so busy, doing stuff, that I forget to eat sometimes!"

"That's no excuse for not eating breakfast," Astrid told him flatly.

"Well, its hard to remember to, when you're completely out of the habit!" Hiccup blurted out in frustration, but then it just kept coming. "For years, dad and I never had anything to talk about. Not a thing! So mornings tended to be tense and awkward. So I started

skipping it. Now you expect me to pick up something that died years ago and bring it back to life in a single day?"

Oh. Astrid's gaze dropped. It seemed she'd just opened a whole new can of worms. Hiccup's reasons for skipping breakfast were far more loaded than she'd guessed. She stood up and looked him squarely in the eyes. His held a guarded look, as well a smidge of remaining anger. He was also blushing a little. Those were words he'd clearly not meant to say, but he wasn't taking them back either.

"Bet you got a lot to talk about now," she said quietly.

Hiccup's expression instantly softened, and he seemed about to say something when the door crashed open with a loud bang. They both startled and turned to see Stoick march in and close the door behind him.

"Hi dad," Hiccup said, completely unphased, as if this kind of an entrance was common place.

"Hiccup, so help me," he began. "If I have to listen to the complaints of one more farmer about the Thorston twins tipping yaks, I'm gonna bash their brains in... after I make them all sit in a ring holding hands... and sing that old nursery song about getting along."

Hiccup smiled. "Well if you can't remember what the song's even called, I doubt that they will remember all the words," he said.

Stoick smiled and chuckled a little. "It would no doubt be a sight to see," he said than turned his attention towards Astrid. "Ah, the fierce Hofferson girl. What can I do for you today, lass?"

Astrid took a deep breath. She had always found Stoick the Vast to be intimidating, even when he was trying not to be. It was now or never.

"Well, Chief, sir," she began with an inward wince at how clumsy that sounded. "I caught Snotlout bullying Hi- your son today."

Stoick's well endowed eyebrow's came down like storm clouds, and he glanced quickly at his son. "Is this true?" he asked in a tone that was dangerously quiet.

Astrid turned to look at Hiccup who gulped nervously, but nodded. "Yes, sir," he admitted quietly. "It's true."

Stoick took a step forward until he was directly in front of his son, and then knelt, surprising everyone. He put a hand on Hiccup's shoulder, and looked him in the eye.

"Were you hurt?" he asked.

Hiccup looked more than a little surprised, but he managed to stutter out an answer. "A little," he said. "But Astrid was there, so it wasn't as bad as it could have been."

Stoick nodded and gestured Astrid closer. She stepped forward hesitantly and narrowly kept herself from flinching when he lifted

his other hand and set it on her shoulder. She was surprised, it felt heavy, but somehow comforting.

"Thank you for being there for my boy," Stoick told her quietly. "Now I have a tall order for you, lass. Can you continue to watch his back for me? I would go straight to my brother to give him an earful if this was a straightforward problem. But it's not."

He paused and looked them both in the eye for a moment to communicate the seriousness of the situation.

"Now, what I say to you cannot leave this house," Stoick continued. "I need your word that it won't."

"My lips are sealed," Astrid said quickly. She had never seen Stoick act like this before, and to be honest, it was more frightening than when he was roaring his battle cry.

"I won't say anything, dad," Hiccup promised.

Then Stoick nodded and leaned back on his haunches, his hand leaving their shoulder's to brace against his legs.

"I have suspected for quite some time, that my brother has been abusing his son," Stoick said gravely.

## 5. Chapter 5

Ladies and Gents, I give you chapter five.

Meatlug, care to give the disclaimer?

Meatlug snores loudly, one of her legs twitching in reaction to her dream.

Uh, Meatlug that's your cue!

The dragon merely turns over and continues sleeping.

Okay, me again. I do not own How to Train Your Dragon.

oOoOo

Astrid could only stare at her chief in shock. Snotlout? Abused? No way!

"That," Hiccup began hesitantly. "That actually makes some sense."

Astrid looked at him incredulously. "Hiccup," she exclaimed. "I just caught that guy beating you with your own leg!"

Stoick's expression hardened and Astrid mentally beat her head against a wall, but it was too late to unsay it, so she forged ahead. "Now you're gonna sympathize with him?!"

"Astrid, think about it," Hiccup said imploringly, his eyes wide and pleading. It was a look that spelled doom for her.

Astrid sighed and crossed her arms. "Alright, convince me."

Hiccup smiled at her in that way that spoke of how happy he was just to be able to reason with some one, and Astrid almost shook her head. This was such a mundane thing Hiccup was so pleased over, he didn't have to smile like that every time like she'd just handed him a gift.

"Okay," he began. "First off, Astrid, do you remember Thawfest?"

"How could I not?" she said.

"Do you know why I lost?" Hiccup asked. Stoick was frowning again.

"I know you threw the race," Astrid said glancing shyly at the chief whose look darkened even more.

"Yes, but do you know why?" he prompted.

Astrid shook her head. He was beating around the bush again. "You threw it because you weren't acting like you."

Hiccup shook his head. "That is only a very small part of it," he said. "Just before the race began, you talked to me dad. You said that even if I didn't win, you would still be proud."

Stoick placed his hand on Hiccup's shoulder encouragingly. "And I am," he confirmed.

Hiccup smiled again and reached up to grab as much of his father's hand as he could. But his smile faded. "Just after that, I heard Spitelout and Snotlout holding a similar conversation, only, Spitelout wasn't being very encouraging. He told Snotlout that he'd better win or else."

Stoick's expression said 'I thought so.' He nodded. "I thought it was a bit strange when Hookfang passed the finish line first," he said. "I've seen how fast that Night Fury of yours can go when he's really trying. He's five times faster than that nightmare."

"That's not the only thing," Hiccup, said softly. "When I passed him, and Snotlout realized there was no way he could win, I turned back and got a good look at his face. I'd never seen him so close to tears. He was terrified, and this could not have been a simple fear of losing."

Astrid stared at Hiccup for a moment, feeling slightly blown away by his compassion. "And you never told anyone about this?"

"How could I?" Hiccup asked earnestly. "Spitelout and Snotlout can never learn that I threw the race or Spitelout will know that his son didn't get a complete victory. From there is anyone's guess..."

Astrid looked down and nodded. Hiccup was right. Now that she thought about it, it almost made perfect sense. It explained so much about his behavior; how, one moment Snotlout seemed to have redeemable

characteristics and the next moment he'd have Hiccup cornered and helpless. He never went after anyone else, not because Hiccup was an easy mark, but because Hiccup was the root of all his problems, at least from Snotlout's perspective. She could see how easy it would be to blame Hiccup for the way his father treated him. The more Hiccup prospered in the eyes of the Hooligans, the less favor Snotlout had with his father, and things had been going swimmingly for Berk's newest hero.

But Astrid could not forget the way Snotlout had stood over a trapped and struggling Hiccup as he rained blows down on the smaller boy's tiny frame. That was not how honorable warrior's settled their differences.

"What are we gonna do about this?" Astrid asked. "We can't ignore the fact that Snotlout could really hurt Hiccup next time."

Stoick's eyes narrowed. "There wont be a next time," he said grimly. "Astrid, I'm giving you your first guard mission. Make sure no harm comes to my son. And Hiccup, if Astrid isn't with you, make sure your dragon is. Don't give him an opportunity to catch you alone."

"Okay dad," Hiccup said, sounding relieved. "But what about Snotlout? He's not in a good position either."

Stoick sighed heavily and rubbed his hand over his eyes wearily. "Any direct confrontation I could bring against my brother can only end in disaster," he said. "Your cousin would be under even more pressure, which would only make him all the more determined to strike out at you."

"What if we went straight for Snotlout?" Astrid asked only to knock her own idea down with her next statement. "Nevermind, he's too stupidly loyal to ever give his father away."

Stoick nodded. "That is another aspect of this problem. If I could find a way to get the boy out of his father's influence..."

Astrid glanced at Hiccup just in time to see his face light up, and his eyes widen slightly. She knew that look. That was Hiccup's 'I have an idea,' face.

"What are you thinking Hiccup?" she asked.

Stoick glanced sharply at his son.

Hiccup looked at both of them. "It might only be a temporary solution," he said. "But why don't we do just that? Get him out of his father's way. Keep him busy, perhaps even off the island."

Stoick nodded. "Its a good thought Hiccup," he said. "I can keep my brother busy in a similar way so the two will rarely ever cross paths. But you're right about it being a temporary thing."

"I'm sure we can think of something better in the next few weeks," Astrid said.

The three shared a smile. It felt good to reach a solution to a complicated problem, even a temporary one. Their bit of peace was

shattered however, when the door burst open to admit a pair of rambunctious dragons. Toothless and Stormfly squirmed inside at the same time and bounced excitedly over to their riders. Stoick stood up and roared for silence. The dragons froze and the happy warbles and squawks gave way to silence. Toothless shook his head and snorted dismissively, but both dragons seemed to put a cap on their exuberance.

"Hey girl," Astrid said to Stormfly. "Did you have fun today?"

The Nadder crooned happily in response and rubbed her large head against Astrid's shoulder, but they both turned to watch Hiccup and Toothless. Their greeting was quieter and did not take any words. Hiccup rubbed the black dragon's head, when the dragon pushed his head onto his lap in a gentle demand for attention. But it didn't last long. The dragon's nose twitched and he pulled away to nose at Hiccup's leg, right where he'd been cut by the leather of his own prothetic.

"Oh," Hiccup said. "You smelled that did you?"

Stoick stepped forward. "Hiccup," he said. "He only does that when you're bleeding. You never told me exactly what happened."

Astrid stood up abruptly. "Stormfly has been on the ground all day," she said hastily. "I'm gonna take her flying."

Stoick nodded at her gratefully. "Have a good flight."

Hiccup turned pleading eyes on her, begging her silently to not leave him alone for this. Her heart almost melted, but she shook her head at him and smiled. \_ You'll be just fine, Hiccup\_. Stormfly followed her eagerly out of the house, and Astrid grabbed one of her lower crest horns and swung herself up onto the dragon's back. She took off at once. "Take us to the clouds Stormfly!"

oOoOo

Stoick closed the door after Astrid and turned back to look back at his son. "Hiccup, how long has this been going on? And don't tell me this just started either."

Hiccup closed his eyes, his fists bunching against the top of Toothless's head. He seemed to gather his strength. His eyes opened again, but remained focused on his dragon.

"I was eight years old the first time Snotlout hit me," he said quietly.

oOoOo

This evening was quite the eye opener for Stoick the Vast. As Hiccup told of every instance of abuse he'd received from not only Snotlout but at times the twins as well, Stoick came to truly appreciate Hiccup's strength. Despite being small and weak, Hiccup fought tooth and claw, every single time, making their fun come at quite a price. Then Hiccup very reluctantly explained the most recent of those injustices and even more reluctantly pulled up his shirt in the back to let his father see the bruises. Hiccup wouldn't have shown his father the cuts and abrasions on his leg, but Toothless threatened to

sit on him and he finally pulled up his pant leg and let his father change the bandages.

Then they ate dinner in front of the fire, and ever so slowly, Hiccup came to lean against his father's broad shoulders. He fell asleep that way and Stoick was more than happy to carry his little son to bed. Toothless followed him up the stairs and settled on the stone pad that was his resting place. Stoick gently eased his son down onto the bed and undid the buckles on the prosthetic, placing it nearby. The single furry boot came next, and he drew the blankets up to Hiccup's chin.

The father nodded in satisfaction and turned to see the dragon staring at him. "He's not out of danger yet Toothless," he murmured. "You'll have to keep him safe for me, again."

The dragon blinked once, and gave a little nod. Certainly, there was no dragon out there that was a match for this Night Fury, Stoick thought. He left and the dragon settled down to sleep.

## 6. Chapter 6

Wow! Over the hump and on to chapter six! Thanks for your support everyone!

Now, poor nameless Terror from the kill ring, the last and smallest, but certainly not the least, give these ladies and gentlemen the disclaimer.

The Terror trills happily and seems to have the best intentions, but he spots a gleam of light dancing on the floor. He instantly scampers off chasing the fleeing light with enraged and adorable squeaks and growls. I can hear laughing in the back round and I can't help but sigh and shake my head. It's the twins of course...

Ahem. I do not own How to Train Your Dragon.

oOoOo

Things went smoothly for the next week. Neither, Snotlout, nor Spitelout had a moments rest in which to cause trouble. They were very much absorbed in their duties. Snotlout was out flying patrols nearly from dawn till dusk and Spitelout was commonly seen alongside Stoick supervising and generally being useful. If they suspected anything else was a foot, they either didn't notice or simply didn't say.

Astrid kept good on her promise and became Hiccup's third shadow, Toothless having already claimed second. Between the two of them, they managed to keep him out of harms way. Her constant presence around Hiccup however, would cause another problem...

Hiccup was on his way towards the ring when his metal foot got caught on a stone and he tripped. He would have hit the ground hard, but Astrid was just quick enough to catch him and set him back on his feet.

"Woa," she said.



Hiccup's face colored. "I know, I've gotten even clumsier since-."

"That's not what I was thinking about," Astrid said cutting him off. "I think you've actually put on some weight. It actually took some effort to keep you up."

Hiccup glanced down at himself curiously. "Really?" he said. "I don't really look that much bigger."

Astrid rolled her eyes and continued walking towards the dragon ring. "Haven't you already proved that size doesn't matter? The rest of us understand it, so why don't you?"

Hiccup gave her a grateful and slightly wry smile. "Old dreams can be a little difficult to give up."

Astrid paused to think about that and she could see how that was true. Blessings in disguise were often the hardest things to accept. "Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked quietly.

Hiccup looked at her and smiled. Astrid could have sworn her heart stopped for a bit. That smile. It was rare. His emerald eyes would light up with a calm joy, and his smile was a soft, presence on his face that spoke of a deep contentment.

"Don't worry Astrid," he said. "I've lost count of the ways that you've already helped. But the most important thing, is that you remind me that what I have now is much, muuuuch better than what I had back then."

It was so nice to hear him say that; to hear that her efforts were making his life better. Astrid could not keep from smiling herself. "Right," she said. "You've got me, now."

Hiccup's smile turned sharper and a mischievous gleam touched his green eyes off with a golden spark. "Are you sure that's not the other way around?" he asked. "I mean, I'm pretty sure you have me."

Astrid grinned and punched him lightly on the shoulder, not even enough force to hurt him. "And you better not forget it."

"Oh, trust me, I wont," Hiccup said returning her grin, albeit a little lopsided.

That's when they entered the dragon academy. Things seemed pretty normal, the twins were alternately punching each other, shouting something about stars as Barf and Belch looked on, and Fishlegs was reading a selection from the dragon book to a very disinterested Meatlug. Then they noticed Snotlout leaning against a sleeping Hookfang with a very discontented look on his face.

Astrid watched him somewhat warily as she began rubbing her dragon down for the day. Hiccup was a small ways away, doing the same for Toothless. She was just beginning to relax when Snotlout seemed to make up his mind and he pushed himself up off his dragon to swagger across the ring towards her. She sighed. At least he hadn't made a beeline towards Hiccup.

"Hey, babe," he said. "I was just wondering what was up between you and 'Useless.'"

Astrid sighed again and kneeled down to rub at the stubborn spot beneath Stormfly's wing. The Nadder obligingly lifted the wing to give her access.

"When are you going to get it through your thick skull that he's not useless?" she asked and noted that Hiccup was listening in. She could tell by the way his hands slowed in their work.

"Why are you defending him all of a sudden?" Snotlout asked. "You don't know him!"

That's when the whole ring decided to listen in, including the dragons.

Astrid stood up and met Snotlout's eyes. "Actually," she said proudly. "I do know him."

"Alright, what's his favorite color?" Snotlout asked crossing his arms.

"Red," Astrid shot back without hesitation.

Snotlout hesitated at that, and a look of uncertainty crossed his face. "The-en... Uhhh. Oh! Where does Hiccup go when he disappears?"

Astrid smiled. Over the last few months, Astrid had made a point of learning every single one of Hiccup's little hidey holes. Sheesh, the least he could do was give her a bit of a challenge.

"His favorite spot in town is the back room in the forge," she said. "And the spot where he and Toothless learned how to fly is... a secret."

Snotlout's uncertainty grew and he took a step back. "Well," he blustered. "I guess that means we can't really be together. If you're willing to put up with Hiccup, then who wouldn't you sleep with."

Astrid's temper flared and she felt the blood rise in her cheeks. No one calls Astrid Hofferson a loose woman with impunity. But she saw something that made her hesitate.

Hiccup stood up from Toothless, his fists clenched tight. He turned and walked toward's Snotlout with deadly purpose in his stride. With one hand he tapped Snotlout on the shoulder and drew back the other.

"Hey, Snotlout," he said quietly.

Snotlout turned in slight surprise only to get Hiccup's small fist in his face.

Everyone there gasped in shock, including Astrid. No one had ever seen Hiccup get mad enough to throw the first punch. Snotlout reeled back and stared at his cousin in dumb shock.

"I can put up with a lot of things," Hiccup said, his voice ringing loud and clear. "But don't you dare insult Astrid or try to slander her honor, because I will be the first to defend it. I may be small and weak, but I will do whatever it takes to prove you wrong!"

Snotlout continued to stare dumbly at Hiccup for a bit. The blood dripping down his chin from his nose seemed to shake him out of it, though and he dragged his arm across his face.

\_Oh, Hiccup, you're in for it now. I'm gonna have to step in and knock some heads together.\_

Everyone watched with baited breath as Snotlout approached Hiccup, who stood his ground firmly, a look of steely resolution on his face. Then to the surprise of all, Snotlout laughed.

"Its about time, cousin," he said. Then he held out his hand and Hiccup quietly accepted it.

"I was wondering when you'd finally say 'no,'" Snotlout said. "You bloodied my nose! That was a really good hit! I don't care what anyone says, you are going to be a great chief someday!"

The day went on without further incident. Except that Snotlout and Hiccup seemed to have this new and slightly frightening understanding, and Snotlout never so much as glanced Astrid's way ever again.

oOoOo

Life changed a lot for Hiccup in the months after he lost his leg. Some of it was painful and rough, and some of it was unbelievably good. Through it all, Astrid stuck by his side, carrying him when he fell and smiling with him when he smiled. She got to watch as Hiccup slowly stopped pretending that everything was fine as it became true. Best of all, she came to know this wonderful person named Hiccup. It was obvious that Hiccup loved dragons and that dragons loved Hiccup, but Astrid also knew the more subtle things. Hiccup was a very passionate kind person with a strong sense of justice, and it was this Hiccup who won her heart. She could only hope that he would one day fully entrust his to her. Luckily, it was looking more and more likely every day.

End  
file.